Territorial Divisibility Narrative: The Hidden Catalyzing Agent Behind Ethnic Turmoil in Ethiopia

By BAYE TESHAGER ASMAMAW

"it represents Ethiopia, its land, its water, its air, the flowers, the grass, the plants, the animals, the birds and the songs of the birds, the smells of the bush, the firewood, the dung, the straw, and the sounds of the rivers. The smell, color and taste of the food, the traditional outfits, the songs, the holidays, the funeral pomp and the weddings and the debutantes, and the people altogether that can never be replaced or be found anywhere else, and that nobody can live without."
A bag of Ethiopian soil — goodbye gift from my landlady

The tense situations in Ethiopia defy understanding of ethnic mayhem in the twenty-first century. The language-based ethnic federalism, which was made the rule of the land in 1991, has resulted in devastating consequences even for those who think they are not vulnerable. The death, destruction, and displacement of "ethnic others"; soaring income inequality and unemployment; accelerating rupture of the social fabric that binds Ethiopians together: today's ethnic brutalities cannot be fully understood in the usual terms of conflict and injustice. They can be more accurately understood as a type of territorial expulsion – from the very notion of belongingness that makes life possible, from former homes and surroundings, and even from professional livelihood. From ethnic majority to minority, the complexity of the attacks and ruthlessness we have come to witness are stirred too often by the system in ways that produce viciousness that has evolved into predatory formations – accumulations of grief, revenge, and outcomes that go beyond anyone's capacity to comprehend.

In the past four months alone, there were attacks and brutalities in several parts of the country. On the last day of October, at least 27 people were killed "due to conflicts along the borders of Somali and Afar", as per the statement from the government, when militias from the two eastern states clashed over disputed boundaries. In Konso, an area in southern

Ethiopia, a communal conflict resulted in dreadful killings of at least 66 people. In early November, gunmen killed more than 32 ethnic Amharas and torched more than 20 houses in a raid on in Wellega, an area in western Ethiopia. The war between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) also caused a massacre of more than 1100 residents of Mai-Kadra town, who were ethnic Amharas, in cold blood and yet unknown number of causalities in the proper Tigray region.

The very recent massacre of over 207 innocent civilians, mostly Amharas and Agews, that took place on December 23, 2020 in Bekuji, a village in the Bulen district of Benshangul-Gumuz region that borders Sudan, is also the extension of brutality towards "ethnic others". The attack came less than 24 hours after the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, discussed security and reconciliation efforts with regional authorities and elders of the Benshangul-Gumuz community in the regional capital, Assosa, which has been proved unsuccessful by the massacre that unfolded the next day. However, this recent massacre might have also brought the catalyzing agent, persistent territorial divisibility narrative, into light. The quoted speech, below, of Sebsibe Nitsatsie, former vice-President of Begshangul-Gumuz region who participated the meeting called by the Ethiopian Prime Minister representing ethnic Gumuz elders, helps understand how the narrative came into play in the recent atrocities. Nitsatsie, in a televised speech, said:

> *"The conflicts in 2019 and 2020 were between the two [Amhara and Gumuz] ethnic groups. The primary cause was the junta's [TPLF] sinister divide and conquer agenda. … the junta exploited the **land** of the Gumuz people and make fortune out of it including constructing high-rise buildings in Dubai [or foreign countries]. … the junta also used its financial capital to recruit youths from Gumuz community to serve its heinous purposes. … the other problem we have got since the past three years is from the Amharas: …the agenda of the Amhara regional government is **territory**. … media like ESAT are also aggravating the problem; ESAT produces a large number of contents in its news and programs about our **territories** and even the soyabeans [cereals] we grow.*
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> *They [the Amharas] want to install slavery again. Historically, slavery lasted in our world for about 30 [300] years but in Ethiopia, it lasted more than 40 [400] years. They [the Amharas] could have taken our **territory** and made fortune out of it in the 18th century and built whatever they wanted, but now we are awake. … there is also huge resettlement going on as we speak by bringing people from the Amhara [region] to our **territories**. This is extremely dangerous; a clear indication that the Amhara regional government has a plan to hold a referendum on our lands soon. We want Your Excellency, Prime Minister [Abiy Ahmed], to intervene and stop this." – translated from a televised speech/plea by "Gumuz elder" 24 hours before the recent massacre.*

Most of the accusations by the old man towards perceived enemies, the Amharas, might be unsubstantiated and not supported by credible evidence and, hence, can be disputed. But it is clear for everyone that territorial divisibility narrative was in full display as everything in the elder man's speech was referenced to "territories" and indications are that the divisibility narrative might have already been deeply rooted in the Gumuz society with the help of political agitators.

Territorial divisibility narrative is an old political tactic and is not new to Ethiopia either. History is replete with conflicts in which governments or groups within one country fight to the death over what appears to be a territory of questionable value.

Moreover, political actors often exploit territory and use it as a potent source of mass mobilization (regionalism). They form a narrative to their constituency by presenting territory only as a physical object that can be divided and later redivided; that can be explored, inhabited, mined, polluted, exchanged, sold, bought, and farmed; and that its borders and boundaries can be redrawn, placenames changed. For instance, Taye Dendea, a politician who holds office in the Prosperity Party's Oromia branch, pledged an eye-opening allegiance to this narrative through his social media accounts. In one of his posts that specifically blames the Amharas of territorial demand, allegation that is not supported by evidence, he said

> *"… raising the question of **territory** before the burial of the fallen heroes, who were killed by TPLF, and the freeing of captives only serves the agenda of the 'junta'[TPLF]. … the campaign to baptize "Amharaness" to Tigre and Oromo language speakers in Alamata [a small town in Northern Ethiopia] by forcing them to "Sign in as Amhara or leave the **territory**" is being more a junta than the TPLF!" – translated from December 10, 2020 post by Taye Dendea.*

In another post, he also said,

> *"Extremists are greedy by nature. They cannot have enough of anything. They want to control everything! If they get your hands, they demand for your eyes. It is important to remain alert!" – translated from December 26, 2020 post by Taye Dendea.*

It is, again, crystal clear on both of Taye's quoted posts that, the issue of divisibility narrative is the central fueling massage. He presented territory as nothing but only a physical and quantifiable object that the Amharas can snatch from "ethnic others" whenever they get the chance and cannot have enough of. Not only Taye brought the narrative into light but also tried to use the narrative as an instrument to mobilize those "ethnic other" communities and fuel conflicts saying that there is something taken from "ethnic others" by the Amharas and "they" should be alerted.

The narrative has also been nurtured and looked for by elites in the academia. Among the ten core Oromo questions summarized by Hamdesa Tuso, Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at University of Manitoba and founder of Oromia Studies Association, are:

> *"[Stopping] the exploitation of Oromo resources … among the critical resources is the **land** … the government can give such **land** to the members of [the] ruling class; the government can also take land from the Oromos for its own use"; "the ownership of **Finfiinne (Addis Ababa)** needs to be addressed. … the Oromos who lived on the **territory** were forcibly evicted. The ownership of **Dire-Dawa**, a city also in Oromia, should also be reconsidered"; "Oromos should be granted status similar to Quebec in Canada and Scotland in [the] UK. In both these cases, the concerned nationality is allowed to govern its respective **territory**."*

No clearer explanation than Prof. Tuso's assertions of resources ownership, territory claim, and placename change, Addis Ababa to 'Finfiinne', can express the deep-rooted territorial divisibility narration in the minds and thoughts of the power-have ethnics and political actors in contemporary Ethiopia.

The media are also picking up on the agenda. *Awashpost,* an online newspaper, in its recent article pictures the Amharas as land-grabbers and expansionists. When depicting the war between the Ethiopian government and TPLF, the article reads:

*"… the Amhara Special Force and militia followed in its [the Ethiopian National Defense Force] footsteps to occupy various **locales and border districts** in western Tigray. … Some Oromo members and supporters of PP [Prosperity Party] appear especially triggered by their Amhara partners' fervent **territoriality**."*

And taking on the recent attack in the Benshangul-Gumuz region, the article goes as far as blaming the entire ethnic Amharas as expansionists while most victims were Amharas and Agews:

*"The latest violence and tug-of-war in Metekel [a district in Benshangul-Gumuz region] is part of the Amhara **expansionist** agenda. The Metekel zone has extensive **irrigable and fertile agricultural lands**."*

It is not only that this newspaper omitted, perhaps intentionally, the marching of TPLF forces into the Amhara region as far 120 kilometers and the special force and militia were deployed in the area in retaliation, but the article also tried to present the now concluded, according to Ethiopian government, war as a matter of only land-grabbing which seems far from the reality as it was arguably a power struggle rift between the incumbent Abiy Ahmed's government and the ousted TPLF, the former dominant party that led the country for nearly three decades, forces. Furthermore, referencing everything to territory and trying to create a fissure within the Prosperity Party, between the party's Amhara and Oromia branches, is in simple terms breeding conflict and fueling it up with territorial divisibility narrative.

Such narratives can be traced back to the early second half of the twentieth century, when opposition groups in Ethiopian politics and elites entertained ideas about social and demographic engineering and population management, by conceiving of a 'social body'. The sophisticated narrative that created today's territorial divisibility and ethnic instrumentalism is paralleled by the political-engineering expertise that enabled exploitation of identity, language, and culture; and later made a governing law by the constitutional order that allowed the power-have ethnics to acquire enormous economic resources and vast stretches of territory from the have-nots. The narrative sets territory as a core defining criterion in relation to citizenship rights and identities; it is also the basis of political entities: regions, 'woredas'[districts], and 'kebeles'[counties]. Without the use of this narrative, regional settings such as "Oromia, Benshangul-Gumuz, Amhara, Tigray, Somali, SNNP, Harrari, Gambella, Afar, and Sidama" cannot exist. There was no territory such as Oromia in history; it was fabricated less than 30 years ago by using language as a pretext to enjoy ownership of certain territory of Ethiopia. Hence, the core reason for politicians and elites to stick with the divisibility narrative until today is because it helps them to be entitled to ownership of natural resources, such as land, water, minerals, and others that extend to the goods and services produced by the population living in those specific territories; and to comprise military or strategic advantages in terms of natural boundaries, control over transport routes and waterways.

The ethnic brutalities and territorial expulsions we are witnessing these days lays bare the extent to which the sheer complexity of divisibility narrative makes it hard to trace lines of responsibility for the displacements, evictions, and eradications it produces, and equally hard for those who benefit from the system to feel responsible for its depredations.

In many places of the world, however, borders and boundaries seem fixed in time and in the imagination. Contrary to Taye, and others, hasty derelict, the names of the places have mostly remained the same for centuries and generations, and the people inhabiting that land would rather die than lose the hope or right of return in spite of the language they speak and their

ethnic background. No matter how barren or rich, no territory, in the eyes of its inhabitants, is a hollow physical object that is up only for sale or to be used as a weapon for breeding ethnic conflict; it is rather an indivisible and romantic subject intact to the society in an abstract manner.

About seven years ago, my landlady, whose house I tenanted for more than six years, brought me a gift when I was about to leave Ethiopia to study abroad. She came to my house with a basket in her hands. In the basket was a small, clear plastic bag. The bag was tied with a golden cord and affixed with a waxed seal that contained the tricolors of the Ethiopian flag. It was not the seal, the cord, or the bag that mattered most, but the content. Inside this bag was about two ounces of soil— it was not just a soil but a good-bye gift carrying a sensational message. The soil was the representation of Ethiopia. My landlady had gone to great lengths to conceive of, design, and tribute the physical representation of the Ethiopian national identity, a permanent contract, and passed the message along to me. Passing over the basket, she also explained the soil to her was not a bag of dirt; it represents Ethiopia, its land, its water, its air, the flowers, the grass, the plants, the animals, the birds and the songs of the birds, the smells of the bush, the firewood, the dung, the straw, and the sounds of the rivers. The smell, color and taste of the food, the traditional outfits, the songs, the holidays, the funeral pomp and the weddings and the debutantes, and the people altogether that can never be replaced or be found anywhere else, and that nobody can live without. Hence, in this context territory (soil) takes on a meaning that far exceeds its material and objective description as Taye, and others, tried to portray. It becomes not an object to be exchanged but an indivisible component of a one's identity. The complete understanding, therefore, would be treating territories as intractably and eternally indivisible objects that belong to all its inhabitants – irrespective of identity or language. How else can we explain why Ethiopians from all walks of life marched in all directions at various times to defend their realm from external attackers and colonizers, or in places like Jerusalem and Kosovo, men and women not only are willing to die but also allow their sons and daughters to die just to remain in their territories?

In conclusion, Ethiopia is confronting a formidable problem, most of the time disguised under the name of self-determination, in its political order: the emergence of a new logic of justifying atrocities and expulsion by territorial divisibility narrative. The past three decades has seen a sharp growth in the number of people expelled from the core social and economic orders. This tipping into radical expulsion was enabled by elementary decisions in some cases, but in the most part by constitutionally supported narratives like that of territorial divisibility. The notion of constitutionalizing such abominable narratives only fuels conflicts and takes Ethiopia opposite to the more familiar idea of growing together and living in harmony as a way of capturing the pathologies of today's global competition. The solution, thus, shall begin by opening the space for honest political dialogue and by considering revision or a complete change of the current constitutional order, and replacing it with something that works not for the few power-have ethnics but for all of Ethiopians.

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